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THE INFLUENCE OF POPULAR CUSTOMS ON
THE MYSTERY PLAYS.

AMONG students of comparative literature there is a marked tendency to connect the beginnings of certain literary types with popular customs, especially with those customs in which were united the song, the dance, and the game. Jeanroy¹ and Gaston Paris,² for instance, have discussed this origin for lyric poetry; our own Professor Gummere,³ for the ballad and the epic. No one, however, so far as I know, has done the same for the drama. To be sure, there are many incidental and scattered references, and Professor Gummere has called direct attention to the matter in his book on "The Beginnings of Poetry";⁴ but the subject has not been sufficiently developed and emphasized. I think there is reason for believing that these popular customs had quite as much influence on dramatic origins as did the puppet shows or the various entertainments of the jongleurs.

Unquestionably these popular celebrations had striking dramatic characteristics. Jeanroy is not too emphatic when he says:

"Ces chansons de danse étaient éminemment dramatiques: elles l'étaient d'abord par leurs façons brusques et vives de mettre en scène des personnages, et la suppression presque complète de la narrative au profit du dialogue: elles l'étaient plus encore par la manière dont elles étaient chantées, ou pourrait presque dire jouées." ⁵

¹ A. Jeanroy, *La Poésie Lyrique en France au Moyen Age*. Paris, 1889.

² Gaston Paris, *Les Origines de la Poésie Lyrique en France*. Paris, 1892.

³ F. B. Gummere, *Old English Ballads*. Boston, 1894.

⁴ F. B. Gummere, *The Beginnings of Poetry*. New York, 1901. Pages 424 ff.

⁵ A. Jeanroy, *La Poésie Lyrique en France au Moyen Age*. Paris, 1889, p. 293.

The importance of action in the dance can be seen from a few illustrations. We read that the leader as he danced and sang tossed up and caught again a staff on which his gloves were hung.¹ We know that the game of ball was sometimes introduced into the dance, for an old medieval sermon, cited by Uhland, tells how a woman, while leading the dance, was hit on the head and killed by a bat that slipped from the hand of some ball-player.² Uhland has cited, also, an old German poem in which the game of ball is connected with the May Dance, and this may be worthy of mention although the poem does not distinctly state that the game was a part of the dance.³ Hampson in his "*Medii Aevi Kalendarium*" refers to a dance game in the church in which "the deacon, receiving the ball, began an antiphone, or chant, suited to Easter Day; then, taking the ball in his left hand, he commenced a dance to the tune, others of the clergy dancing round, hand in hand. At intervals the ball was handed or tossed by the dean to each of the choristers, the organ playing according to the dance or sport."⁴ Still more striking is the testimony of Giraldus Cambrensis. On his itinerary through Wales, he was present at a religious festival at Brecheinock in honor of St. Almedha. Here men and girls, in the dance, moved by religious frenzy, acted before the people whatever work they had unlawfully done on feast days; one went through the motions of plowing, another of goading on the oxen, a third of spinning, and so on. The dance ended with the placing of gifts upon the altar.⁵

But action was not only an important part of the dance; it was also intimately associated with the words of the song. In the May season when the young people went in procession from house to house, singing and dancing and gathering donations for their sports upon the green, two young men, dressed to represent

¹ F. M. Böhme, *Geschichte des Tanzes in Deutschland*, p. 20, Note 3.

² L. Uhland, *Schriften*, III. p. 477. See also *Zeit. für Volkskunde*, II, p. 153.

³ L. Uhland, *Schriften*, III, p. 472.

⁴ R. T. Hampson, *Medii Aevi Kalendarium*, p. 203.

⁵ Giraldus Cambrensis, *Itinerarium Cambriae*, Book I, Chap. 2.

summer and winter, frequently engaged in a contest symbolic of the two seasons. They fought until summer won. Winter was thrown down, his wrappages stripped off and scattered, and a summer's wreath was carried about.¹ Sometimes the bystanders supplied the chorus by breaking out in praise of the conqueror² or during the duel kept singing :

"Stab aus, Stab aus,
Stecht dem Winter die Augen aus." ²

Often however, the characters themselves went through a taunting dialogue like the old Norse "flytings," pausing after each stanza to belabor each other about the head and shoulders. The old German song "Sommergewinn" is a dialogue of this kind and Böhme insists that it looks back to an actual performance.³ Gaston Paris says the same of the debates between Summer and Winter in France,⁴ and the "Debat de l'Yvre et de l'Esté," belonging to the fourteenth century, has an introduction which seems clearly to connect the piece with a popular performance :

"L'autrier par ung matin, sur la rive Sainne,
Entre Mente et Meulent, tout parmy une plainne
Trouvay deux damoyseaux et l'une vel se demainne ;
Vestu fu d'une robe qui n'estoit pas vilainne :

Sa robe yert de sendal à oyseaux fu pourtraite,
Li autre fu vestu d'une robe grisette,
De gros agneaux fourrée mout rudement portraite ;
Li autre lui disoit à basse voix simplette." ⁵

Indeed popular survivals of the old customs have been pointed out. Grimm refers to Tobler as citing one from Switzerland in

¹ J. Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, ed. E. Hugo Meyer. Berlin, 1875, p. 637.

² J. Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, p. 638.

³ F. M. Böhme, *Altdeutsches Liederbuch*. Leipzig, 1877, p. 356. Böhme discusses the popular connections in an extended note and gives many references.

⁴ Gaston Paris, *Les Origines de la Poésie Lyrique en France*. Paris, 1892, p. 29.

⁵ Montaiglon et Rothschild, *Recueil de Poésies Françaises des XV^e et XVI^e Siècles*. Paris, 1875, vol. x, p. 43.

which Summer is acted by a man thinly clad, holding in one hand a branch decorated with ribbons and fruit, in the other a cudgel with the end much split. Winter is warmly clad, but has a similar cudgel. They lay on to each other's shoulders with loud thwacks, each praising himself and running down his opponent. At length Winter falls back and owns himself beaten.¹

Survivals of similar scenes have been noted in many parts of France. Most noteworthy is the scene in which a woman, Marion, finds clever answers to all her husband's accusations. Victor Smith testifies that in Lorain, at Mardigras, this scene under the name of the "Chanson de la Bergère" is played by two young girls who go about with followers acting and taking up collections of food and money.² In Valay the lace-makers are said to make of it a kind of comedy. Arbaud says of it :

"En nous communiquant la musique et une version du dialogue M. Martini ajoute, 'Ce chante est très répandu ; je l'ai entendu dans toutes les communes que j'ai visitées. A Istres, pendant le carnaval, cette petite scène conjugale est mise en action : deux jeunes gens déguisés, l'un en grande dame de bon vieux temps, l'autre en seigneur et muni d'une longue rapière parcourent les rues et se font un malin plaisir de s'arrêter, pour débiter leur dialogue, devant les maisons habitées par certains maris trop hénévoles ou supposés tels.' . . . Cet usage n'est pas particulier à Istres et ce que notre obligeant correspondant raconte de cette localité se passe dans toute la Provence. . . . La chanson est d'ailleurs connue dans toute la France, la comité du ministère de l'instruction publique en avait reçu au moins vingt versions différents." ³

In England scenes of this kind seem to have been quite as highly developed as on the continent. The contest between

¹J. Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*. Berlin, 1876, p. 641. Also Uhland, *Volkslieder*, Stuttgart, 1893, vol. iv, p. 5 ; Böhme, *Altdeutsches Liederbuch*, Leipzig, 1877, p. 356.

²Puymaigre, *Chants Populaires*, p. 215. Other versions are noted here.

³D. Arbaud, *Chants de la Provence*, II. pp. 155-6. See also Child's *Ballads*, Part IX.

Summer and Winter is not so much in evidence,¹ though the custom has been noted,² and the riding to the May,³ especially the shooting in connection with the English maying⁴ suggests the idea of a battle with the powers of Winter. Possibly too the jousting referred to by Hall in his chronicle is a survival of the old custom.⁵ At any rate England had the same traditional Maytree, May Queen, and May dances, which developed into little pastoral plays. By the middle of the fifteenth century they contained much of the Robin Hood material in dramatic form. Tollet's painted window, assigned by Douce to about 1460-70, represents the morris in connection with the May games and contains a fool, a piper, and six dancers, a May-pole, a hobby-horse, a friar, and a lady; and the lady being crowned is to be taken as queen of May.⁶ We have fragments of a well-developed Robin Hood play, which dates as far back as 1475.⁷ The sword dances⁸ and sword plays⁹ are doubtless survivals of the same class of popular comedy.

A further dramatic characteristic of the popular celebrations was the custom of disguisings, especially in skins of beasts with masks of beast heads. Caesarius of Arles relates how the heathen and even believers "dress themselves in forms of women and beasts and perform other devilish buffooneries."¹⁰ Two sermons attributed to St. Augustine but belonging to the sixth or seventh century¹¹ recount that even the baptized put on the dress of women or wrapped themselves in skins of beasts, masked them-

¹ Hone's citation (Day Book I. 359) from an old English poem by Barnaby Googe is not significant, because Googe's poem is a mere translation from the *Regnum Papisticum* (Basle, 1553, see p. 143) of Neogeorgus (Thomas Kirchmaier), a German protestant of the sixteenth century.

² Brand, *Popular Antiquities*. Ellis's edition, 1883, vol. I, p. 246.

³ Mannhardt, *Wald- und Feldkulte*. Berlin, 1875, p. 367.

⁴ Hall, *Chronicle*. London, 1809, pp. 515, 520.

⁵ Hall, *Chronicle*. London, 1809, p. 520.

⁶ F. J. Child, *English and Scottish Ballads*, vol. V, p. 45. ⁷ Ibid, p. 44.

⁸ Lockhart, *The Life of Scott*, 1837, vol. III, p. 162.

⁹ J. M. Manly, *Specimens of the Pre-Shakspearean Drama*, vol. I.

¹⁰ Marbach, *Die Heilige Weihnachtszeit*. Frankfort, a. M., 1865, p. 111.

¹¹ For authorship, see Eckart, *Francia Orientalis*, I, p. 433.

selves with beast-heads, and sang lascivious songs.¹ On the continent many councils of the church forbade the practice.² In England, Theodore of Canterbury raised his voice in protest and decreed that those who disguised themselves in the hides and heads of beasts should do penance for three years.³ The custom was wide spread and must have added much to the dramatic nature of the popular celebrations.

Finally, the whole matter is confirmed and illustrated by the customs of savage people in our own time. Lyngbye long ago pointed out in connection with the singing and dancing of the Farøe Islanders that "the song is not like dance music simply to order the steps, but at the same time, by its meaning and contents, to waken certain feelings. One can notice by the demeanor of the dancers that they are not indifferent to the tendency and spirit of the song, for by their gestures and expressions they take pains while they dance to show the various contents of it."⁴ The American Indians sometimes appear at their dances in the full disguise of animals, by which means they think in some way to be assimilated to their totems which the disguises represent.⁵ Animals are often imitated in a pantomime representing the expected death of the game.⁶ The snake-dance among the Hopi Indians, in which the snake-youth and the snake-maiden play important parts, is said to dramatize portions of an old national legend of Tijo, the youth who went to the lower world and brought back as his bride the snake-maiden.⁷ Roth says of the dance among the Northwest-Central Queensland aborigines: "I have known when the climbing of a tree after honey, the stealing of cattle by blacks with the tracking and shooting of the marauders, or again the rescue of a European

¹ Migne, *Patrologia*. Series Latina. Vol. 39. Sermones cxxix. cxxx.

² Du Cange, *Glossarium Mediae et Infimae Latinitatis*, under *Kalendae*; Alex. Tille, *Yule and Christmas*. London, 1899, p. 98, Note 2.

³ Thorpe, *Ancient Laws and Institutions of England*, 1840, vol. II, p. 34.

⁴ F. B. Gummere, *Old English Ballads*. Boston, 1894. Introduction, p. lxxxvi.

⁵ J. G. Frazer, *Totemism*. Edinburg, 1887, p. 26.

⁶ J. G. Frazer, *Totemism*. Edinburg, 1887, p. 41.

⁷ J. Walter Fewkes, *Journal of Eth. and Arch.* 1894, vol. IV, p. 106.

by three aborigines in the late flood (which had actually occurred) was staged with full histrionic powers and accoutrements.”¹

I have dwelt upon the dramatic nature of the early popular customs for the purpose of showing their influence on the drama which grew up in the medieval church. From the beginning the people insisted on bringing these customs into connection with the religious celebrations. The clergy complained of it and church councils were continually prohibiting it.²

The exact situation is shown by the case of the dancers of Kölbigk³ in the eleventh century. One who claims to have been among the dancers relates that, at his place, eighteen people, fifteen men, and three women, under the instigation of the devil, were performing their dance songs in the church-yard while the mass was being celebrated. The presbyter, much disturbed by their noise, warned them to desist, and when his admonition was unheeded called down upon them the following curse “Utinam potentia Dei et merito sancti Magni Mirtinis sic iniquitate annum cantando ducatis.” They were forced to dance without ceasing and in much distress through the entire year. At the end of that time they were mercifully released from the curse by the prayers of the bishop.

A similar story is related by Étienne de Bourbon. Certain young men were accustomed basely to disguise themselves and perform their dance songs in both the church-yard and the church. The priest forbade it; but one rash youth, calling down a curse on all who desist from sport on account of the prohibitions of the church, came to the church while the congregation was at prayer and attempted to enter. At the very entrance of the church a fire sprang up at his feet and consumed him.⁴

¹ Walter E. Roth, *Ethnological Studies among the Northwest-Central Queensland Aborigines*, p. 117, Sec. 190.

² D'Ancona, *Origine del teatro italiano*. Turin, 1891, pp. 50, 51.

Alex. Tille, *Yule and Christmas*. London, 1899, p. 125. Notes 1, 2, 3.

F. M. Böhme, *Geschichte des Tanzes in Deutschland*, p. 13.

³ E. Schröder, *Die Tänzer von Kölbigk, ein Mirakel des 11 Jahrhunderts*. *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 1896-7.

See also Giraldus Cambrensis, *Gemma Ecclesiastica*. Part I. Chap. XLIII.

⁴ Étienne de Bourbon, *Anecdotes historique legendes et apologues*. Paris, 1877, pp. 168-9. Société de l'Histoire de France.

Stubbs tells how the custom flourished in England :

"Then have they their Hobby-horses, dragons and other antiques, together with their baudie Pipers and thundering Drummers to strike up the devil's daunce withall, then, marche these heathen company towards the Church and Church-yard, their pipers piping, their drummers thundering, their stumps dauncing, their bells iygling, their handkerchiefs swinging about their heds like madmen, their hobbie horses and other monsters skirmishing amongst the route ; and in this sorte they go to the church (I say) and into the Church (though the Minister be at praier or preaching) dancing and swinging their handkerchiefs over their heds in the Church like devils incarnate, with such a confuse noise that no man can hear his own voice. Then, the foolish people they looke, they stare, they laugh, they fleer, and mount upon fourmes and pewes to see these goodly pageants solemnized in this sort. Then, after this, about the Church they goe againe and again, and so forth into the church-yard ; where they have commonly their Sommerhaules, their bowers, arbors, and banqueting houses set up, wherein they feast, banquet and daunce al that day and (peradventure) all the night too." ¹

In the end popular custom proved stronger than ecclesiastical decree. In many cases the church found it wise to withdraw opposition, and, in connection with church-ales, actually utilized the custom for money-making purposes. An entry in the convocation books of the corporation of Wells, Somerset, ² refers apparently to returns from a play of Robin Hood, exhibitions of dancing girls, and church ales. The entries in regard to the "Kingham" or King-game in the church warden accounts of

¹ Phillip Stubbs, *Anatomy of Abuses in England*. New Shak. Soc. Pub. Series VI, Nos. 4, 6, p. 147.

² "Et insuper in eadem Convocatione omnes et singuli burgenses unanimi assensu ad tunc et ibidem dederunt Magistro Nicolao Trappe potestatem generalem ad inquirendum in quorum manibus pecunie ecclesie ac communitatis Wellie sunt injuste detentae : videlicet, provenientes ante hoc tempus de Robynhode, puellis tripudiantibus communi cervisia ecclesie et hujusmodi. Atque de bonis et pecuniis dictae communitati qualitercumque detentis, et in quorumcunque manibus existentibus. Et desuper, eorum nomina scribere qui habent hujusmodi bona, cum summis, etc."—Child, *Ballads*. Part VI, p. 518.

the parish of Kingston-upon-Thames probably refer to the May-day game since "Kingham and Roby hode" appears as a single entry. Perhaps all references in church-warden accounts to returns for Robynhode refer to these popular performances.¹

One of the chief reasons for the triumph of popular custom over ecclesiastical decree was the general confusion between pagan and christian customs, a confusion which goes back to the Roman time. The Saturnalia, Brumalia, and Kalends of January had become practically a single mid-winter celebration² and, on the advent of the Roman calendar among the Germanic peoples, had attracted to itself many of the customs which formerly belonged to the Germanic New Year in the middle of November.³ All this had resulted in one great pagan festival at the New Year season. When Bishop Liberius in 354 A. D. fixed Christmas day on the 25th of December, the church endeavored to keep the christian festival distinct from the pagan and hoped it would win preeminence over the heathen feast and gradually displace it. But, from the beginning, the people, half-heathen, half-christian, confused the two. A popular Gnostic legend of the birth of Christ contains pagan acts of worship in the dancing of men and women and speaks of Mary as being beloved of Helios.⁴ The neoplatonic sect, the Manichaeans, identified Christ with the sun.⁵ Augustine had to insist with emphasis in his reply to Faustus: "We celebrate the 25th of December not as the birthday of the sun like the unbelievers, but as the birthday of him who created the sun."⁶ In vain did church council after church council forbid believers to take part in the heathen festivals. When the popular conceptions of the two feasts were so closely associated it was impossible to keep the two celebrations apart.

¹ Child, *Ballads*. Part VIII, p. 496.

² Fowler, *Roman Festivals*, p. 268.

³ Tille, *Yule and Christmas*. London, 1899, p. 100.

⁴ Usener, *Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*. Bonn, 1889, I, p. 33.

⁵ Paulus Cassel, *Weihnachten Ursprung, Bräuche, und Aberglauben*. Berlin, 1862, p. 71.

⁶ Quoted from Sermon 190, by Tille in *Die Geschichte der deutschen Weihnachten*. Leipzig, 1893, p. 4.

In time, even the churchmen, especially clerks and subdeacons, yielded to the temptation and made many of the pagan customs part of the religious festivities extending from Christmas to Epiphany. Thus originated within the church the famous Feast of Fools, to which, in the Twelfth century, Beletus undoubtedly refers when he tells how the clergy of his time entered into the sports known as the "Liberties of December"¹ Beletus takes pains to identify the feast with the Old Roman saturnalia, and the analogy is certainly very close. The saturnalia was distinctly the feast of the slaves. On those days they wore the badge of freeman, dressed in their master's clothes, and were waited on at banquets by the masters themselves. They also elected a mock king, who presided over the festivities. There were disguisings and masques.² In the Feast of Fools there was the same overturning of authority, the same feasting and rioting. The clerks elected a mock-bishop to preside over the festivities, parodied the divine service, and introduced dancing and disguising into the church itself.³

The extent to which the impieties of this feast were carried is well illustrated by a letter of the Archbishop of Sens in 1445. "Larvatos et monstruosos vultus deferendo cum vestibus mulierum, aut lenonum vel histrionum, choreas in ecclesia et choro ejusdem ducendo, cantilenas inhonestas cantando, offas pingues super cornu altaris juxta celebrantem missam comedendo, ludum taxillorum ibidem exercendo, de fumo fetido et excorio veterum sotularium thurificando, per totam ecclesiam liguriendo, saltando turpitudinem suam non erubescendo nudos homines sine verendorum tegmine inverecunde ducendo per villam et theatra in curribus et vehiculis sordidis ad infamia spectacula pro risu astantium et concurrentium se transferendo, turpes gesticulationes sui corporis faciendo, verba impudicissima atque

¹ I. Beletus, *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*. Chaps. 72 and 120. See Migne's *Patrologia*, Series Latina, vol. 202.

² Marquardt u. Mommsen, *Römische Alterthümer Staatsverwaltung*, III, 2, p. 286.

³ Du Cange, *Glossarium*, under Kalendae. Cf. R. T. Hampson, *Medii Aevi Kalendarium*, p. 203.

scurrilia proferendo et multas alias abominationes, quarum pudet reminisci, faciendo, et quod recte vocatum est hoc flagitiosum coagulum, Festum fatuorum, videlicet coagulatio malorum hominum exultantium in rebus pessimis.”¹

Nor was this feast confined to the continent; it early made its way into England. About 1240, Grossthead, bishop of Lincoln, called it “Execrabilis consuetudo” and prohibited it within his diocese. Rex stultorum was prohibited at Beverley in 1391.² The inventory of St. Paul’s (1402) mentions the staff and copes for the Feast of Fools.³ The Abbot of Unreason mentioned in a law of the time of Mary, and the Lord of Misrule, the grand-captain of the rioters mentioned by Stubbs,⁴ probably have reference to the same custom. United with the feast of the Boy-bishop, it became so offensive that Henry VIII, in 1541, by royal proclamation, forbade its performance.⁵

Another illustration of the tendency under popular influence to burlesque serious religious services is founded in the Feast of the Ass. This celebration was at first altogether serious and dignified. Eastern tradition had made the ass a very noble animal.⁶ The Christians looked upon Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the ass’s colt as the fulfillment of prophecy and gave to it a symbolic meaning.⁷ The ass has the honor of worshipping the baby Christ in the manger and of warming him with his breath, a tradition which Prudentius celebrated in a famous hymn.⁸ When Balaam’s ass was first introduced into

¹ Du Cange, *Glossarium*, under Kalendæ.

² *Archeologia*, xv, p. 231.

³ *Archeologia*, I, pp. 346, 448, 472, 480.

⁴ Phillip Stubbs, *Anatomy of Abuses in England*. New Shak. Soc. Pub. Series VI, Nos. 4, 6; p. 147.

⁵ Brand, *Popular Antiquities*. Edition of 1849, vol. I, p. 422.

⁶ Judges x. 14; Job. xxxix, 5-8; Genesis xlix, 14-15.

Plutarch, *Symposium*, Bk. iv, Chap. 5.

⁷ St. Augustine, *Contra Faustum*. Bk. xii, Chap. 42.

St. Chrysostom, *Hom. St. Math.* 67.

⁸ “In praepe ponitur
Sub foeno asinorum
Cognoverunt dominum
Christum regem coelorum.”

the Prophet's Play there was probably no thought of comic effect. The early Rouen version, for instance, shows nothing necessarily comic. Even the famous "prose" of the ass was probably serious originally. The oldest known version—It is in the missal of Sens and was written by Pierre de Corbeil before 1222—was conceived apparently in the spirit of the noble eastern tradition, and does not contain the burlesque verses to be found in the version of Beauvais. These portions of the Beauvais version, indeed, are clearly after thoughts, for they are not consistent in tone with the other parts.¹

Still, this custom, however serious in its origin, was easy to burlesque, and to sub-deacons who elected mock-bishops and parodied the divine office, irresistible. The ceremony of Beauvais was burlesque of the broadest kind. It took place on January 14th, and celebrated the escape of the holy family into Egypt. A beautiful girl holding a child at her breast was seated upon an ass and led in procession by the clergy through the principal streets to the parish church. Here the girl and the ass were placed near the high altar and the mass performed. The Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, etc., were concluded by a general braying. A rubric states that at the end of the mass the priest instead of saying to the people "*Ita missa est*," shall bray three times, and the people, instead of saying the "*Deo gratias*" shall bray three times in response.²

When we see to what an extent the popular customs, so rich in dramatic suggestions, had been adopted by the clergy and made part of various religious festivities, often transforming the serious into the burlesque, we can realize how natural it was for the Mystery plays, as soon as they became separated from the liturgy, to take on similar comic aspects.

It was especially easy for comic scenes to grow up around the character of the devil. Of all the personages in the story of re-

¹ R. T. Hampson, *Medii Aevi Kalendarium*, p. 143 ff.; also *Annales Archéologiques*, XVI, p. 28.

² "In fine Missae Sacerdos versus ad populum vice. *Ita missa est*, ter Hinhamnabit; populus verso vice, *Deo gratias*, ter respondebit, Hinhan, Hinhan, Hinhan." Du Cange, *Glossarium*, under *Festum Asinorum*.

demption he was the most real to the medieval mind, for he was not a figure of the remote past, like other Bible characters, but most emphatically a contemporary, busy in the daily life of men. Indeed he was a comic figure even before he found his way into the religious plays. To be sure the churchmen conceived him primarily as the great principle of evil, the adversary of God and the enemy of man, strong in the battle for souls, and delighting to torture those who, through his wiles, lost their hope of bliss.¹ The popular imagination, however, had greatly modified this conception. The necessity that the works of the devil should eventually be brought to naught or made to work for good, brought him into frequent discomfiture.² Legends arose of how divine mercy had intervened to snatch the sinner from the very clutches of the fiend. Theophilus, for instance, sold himself for ecclesiastical power and seemed lost if ever man could be, but the Virgin intervened and even took from the devil by force the written contract in which Theophilus had bargained away his soul. Even Virgil outwitted the fiend, making him an object of ridicule and scorn. The devil had promised to reveal his hidden wisdom if Virgil would set him free from a narrow hole in which he was confined. Virgil did so; but, having secured the secret, expressed doubt that the devil could really have been confined in so small a space: whereupon the devil crawled back into the hole to prove it and Virgil shut him in once more.³

Besides all this, the devil was confused with the various heathen divinities, large and small, and the same popular stories were told of him as of elves, dwarfs, and giants.⁴ Pictures on the old block-books like the Poor Man's Bible show him as a beast demon with horns and tail and cloven feet, exhibiting all the grotesque and sportic characteristics of the classical satyrs

¹ Roskoff, *Geschichte des Teufels*. Leipzig, 1869, p. 363.

² Roskoff, *Geschichte des Teufels*. Leipzig, 1869, pp. 317, 274.

³ Schindler, *Der Aberglaube des Mittelalters*. Breslau, 1858, p. 33; Roskoff, *Geschichte des Teufels*. Leipzig, 1869, p. 385.

⁴ Jos. Jacobs, *English Fairy Tales*. London, 1892, p. 1;

Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, pp. 547, 548.

and fawns.¹ Under such guises as Friar Rush all the pranks of the popular sprites were attributed to him. He was a veritable Puck, a Robin Goodfellow.

Especially significant was his connection, as a beast demon, with the beast disguisings and beast-transformations. The men who performed in beast-masks were the devil's own servants.² They were even transformed into beasts by the power of the fiend,³ and the same pranks are told alike of these transformed men and of devils. Olaus Magnus tells the following story: "In festo enim Nativitatis Christi sub noctem, statuto in loco, quem inter se determinatum habent, tanta luporum ex hominibus diversis in locis habitantibus conversorum copia congregatur, quae postea eadem nocte mira ferocia cum in genus humanum, tum in caetera animalia, quae feram naturam non habent, saevit, (?) ut majus detrimentum ab his, istius regionis inhabitores, quam unquam a veris et naturalibus lupis accipiant. . . . Cellaria cervisiarum ingrediunter, ac illic aliquot cervisiae, aut medonis tonnas epotant, ipsaque vasa vacua in medio cellarii unum super aliud elevando collocant, in quo a nativis ac genuinis lupis discrepant." ⁴

Wright tells the same story of demons: "A great man's cellar was once haunted by demons, who drank all his wine, while the owner was totally at a loss to account for its rapid disappearance. After many unsuccessful attempts to discover the depredators, some one, probably suspecting the truth, suggested that he should mark one of the barrels with holy water, and next morning a demon was found stuck fast to the barrel."⁵

The devil was connected also with the popular dance. It was considered the devil's own sport. Pious churchmen

¹ Thos. Wright, *History of Caricature and Grotesque*. London, 1865, pp. 62, 70, 71.

² P. Cassel, *Weihnachten*. Berlin, 1862, p. 281.

³ Cassel, *Weihnachten*, p. 280.

R. T. Hampson, *Medii Aevi Kalendarium*, p. 111 ff.

Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topographia Hibernica*. Dist. II. Cap. XIX.

⁴ Olaus Magnus, *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus*. Bk. 18, Chap. 45, 47.

⁵ Thos. Wright, *History of Caricature and Grotesque*. London, 1865, p. 62.

thought of him as "the inventor, the instigator, the leader of the dance." An old sermon informs us, "Der ummegende tantz ist ein ring oder circkel, des mittel der teufel est."¹ Jacques de Vitry says that "just as the wether preceding the flock wears a bell about the neck, so the woman who leads the song and dance has, as it were, the bell of the devil about her neck."² Étienne de Bourbon tells the story that when a certain woman was leading the dance, a holy man saw a devil dancing above her head and controlling her movements."³

Now, this grotesque and mirthful conception of the devil was better suited to dramatic adaptation than the old theological conception, because it was more concrete and picturesque. Then, too, the people naturally demanded in the drama their own familiar fiend. Consequently the devil entered the Mystery plays, at once, as a comic personage and naturally brought with him much of the popular comedy with which he was already associated. Stage directions tell us how he regaled the audience with song and dance and pantomime, performing much more than the lines which he spoke indicated, and often appearing for his foolery when he had no regular part in the dialogue.

The Norman play "Adam,"⁴ belonging to the twelfth century is comparatively rich in these directions. Here we read that "while Adam and Eve are enjoying themselves in paradise, devils shall rush across the scene performing appropriate actions." When Adam and Eve are bound with chains and carried away into Hell, many devils gather about hellmouth and perform a great dance (*magnum tripudium*) while others make a fume to arise out of Hell and shout for joy, beating on pots and kettles.⁵

In both the German and French plays the devils dance. In the first scene of the Alsfeld play, for instance, when Satan

¹ L. Uhland, *Schriften*, III, p. 477, from *Altd. Blüt.*, I, 52.

² *The Exempla of Jacques de Vitry*, ed. T. F. Crane. London, 1890, p. 131.

³ Étienne de Bourbon, *Anecdotes historiques legendes et apologues*, publiés pour la Société de l'Histoire de France. 1877, p. 397.

⁴ *Adam, Mystère du XII^e Siècle* ed. Leon Palustre. Paris, 1877, p. 18.

⁵ *Adam*, ed. Leon Palustre. Paris, 1877, p. 84.

mounts his throne, the other devils gather round dancing and singing :

Lucifer in dem throne / ryngelyn ryss
Der was eyn engel schone / ryngelyn ryss.¹

In the French passion play by Greban, Lucifer calls upon his devils to entertain him and they dance and sing before him in an extended scene.²

The devils indulged also in recrimination and fighting after the fashion of the old "flytings" and the contests between Summer and Winter. In the Alsfeld play, when Lucifer laments his fate, the devils tell him he is preaching and beat him till he changes his tone. In "Le Mystère du Viel Testament" nearly a hundred lines are given to the abuse of Lucifer. In Greban's play recrimination abounds throughout and punishment is invariably meted out to devils who return from their missions unsuccessful. In the York "Harrowing of Hell" the devils abuse one another in their alarm at the approach of Christ. There is a quarrel in the Chester play on "The Fall of Lucifer." The York play on the same subject contains a hand to hand fight. These devils in their grotesque beast costumes pummelling one another were highly comic. The people enjoyed them much as the modern small boy enjoys a dog-fight. The same kind of effect was produced as in the popular contests between Summer and Winter.³

¹ Lines 139-40.

² Arnould Greban, *Le Mystère de la Passion*, ed. Paris and Raynaud. Paris, 1878, p. 49.

³ In connection with the "Harrowing of Hell" a set debate grew up. The Alsfeld play has a perfect example of a "flyting." The "Quis est rex gloriæ" of the original antiphona becomes in the mouth of the devil :

"Wer is der Konigk der eren sso rich
der do sso geweldiglich
cloppet on vor myner thore?
Uff myne pyn! Komme ich hervor
Ich gebe ein eyenen Kulenslagk
hie fellet middler uff synen sagk."

The English York Play (No. 37) however, and the 12th century "Harrowing of Hell" are theological and literary.

Of course this popular comedy soon spread within the religious plays. The devils danced with the Jews¹ and with Mary Magdalene,² Joseph and the servant danced about the cradle of Jesus singing, "In dulce jubilo,"³ and later danced with the boy, singing, "En trinitatis speculum." Jesus is forced to dance with the Jews at his trial.⁴ In the Vienna Easter Play the Jews dance on their way to Pilate and sing in Jewish⁵ and the soldiers dance on their way to the grave. In the crucifixion scene of the Alsfeld play (l. 6352) the Jews dance about the cross, and in the English Coventry play, just after Christ has been nailed to the cross, a rubric tells us "Here xule thei leve of and dauncyn aboute the cros shortly."

Fighting became a common incident. When Noah's wife refuses to enter the ark Noah attempts to bring her by force and they have a bout at fisticuffs. In the various plays on the "Slaughter of the Innocents" the soldiers are frequently beaten by the women, as in the Digby play where Watkyn, Herod's coward servant, who has been dubbed knight and sent on this adventure, is soundly beaten with the distaff.⁶ Especially noteworthy are the merchant scenes in the German resurrection plays, where the wife of the mountebank objects to the price at which the ointment has been sold to the three Maries, and a quarrel results in which the wife receives a sound beating. This scene is very widespread in the German passion plays and is particularly significant because the same scene occurs frequently in the carnival plays, the Fastnachtsspiele. Indeed, many striking verbal resemblances have been pointed out showing that one must have borrowed from the other.⁷ The significance

¹ Dr. R. Froning, *Das Drama des Mittelalters*. Stuttgart. *Das Alsfelder Passionsspiel*, l. 897.

² *Das Alsfelder Passionsspiel*, l. 1770.

³ Froning, *Das Drama des Mittelalters*. *Das Hessische Weihnachtsspiel*, l. 181.

⁴ F. J. Mone, *Schauspiele des Mittelalters*, Karlsruhe, 1846. Vol. II, p. 290.

⁵ Hoffman von Fallersleben, *Fundgruben für Geschichte deutscher Sprache und Literatur*. Breslau, 1837. Vol. III, p. 300.

⁶ *The Digby Mysteries*, E.E.T.S., 1896.

⁷ Ludwig Wirth, *Die Oster- und Passionsspiele*. Halle, 1889.

lies in the fact that the Fastnachtsspiele are directly connected with the popular customs. Indeed Creizenach believes that they grew directly out of the popular song and dance.¹ A close connection between the popular dramatic customs and the comedy of the mystery plays is certain.

It is not necessary to dwell upon the further development of this comedy within the religious plays, when secular literature and popularized church legend were drawn upon for comic material. Enough has been said for my present purpose. The popular customs were highly dramatic. In the general confusion between pagan and christian celebrations, these customs forced their way into the church and became part of the religious festivities. It thus became natural and easy for the mystery plays, as soon as they became separated from the liturgy, to take on comic aspects. And this was especially easy in the devil-scenes, for the devil was already a comic figure intimately connected with these popular customs. The incongruous mixture of the story of redemption with horse-play and farce, so shocking to modern taste, is thus seen to be the natural expression of medieval life and thought.

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¹ A. Creizenach, *Geschichte des Neueren Dramas*. Halle, 1893. I, p. 408 f.